

## CHAPTER II.

Vera Cruz.—Almeida.—Generals St. Anna and Vittoria.—  
Posada, or Inn.—Markets.—Vultures.

WE landed on a low pier of solid masonry ; I had scarcely put my foot upon it when I observed that it was partially paved with pigs of iron, each bearing the broad arrow of the king of England ; which I afterwards learnt, was part of the ballast of an English frigate, left in order to enable her to return with a greater quantity of specie. Thus the first step an Englishman takes in New Spain is upon what was once English property. May this be an auspicious omen of the future good understanding and commercial intercourse between the two countries. We passed the custom-house at the water-gate, unques-



SOUTH SIDE OF VERACRUZ, FROM THE CASTLE OF SAN JUAN DE ULUA.

tioned and unexamined, and were conducted to the principal inn or Posada.

We walked out to see the town, and deliver our letters, with which I was well furnished; but the English traveller who trusts to letters of introduction, will find himself wofully disappointed; for of thirty which I carried out, not one procured me even an invitation to dinner. This, as future experience taught me, is the universal feeling of the Spaniards towards the English. Being Sunday evening, we were recommended to see the public walk on the outside the gate, south of the city. It is prettily fitted with seats for the promenaders, but the company was not gay. Here, however, we had an opportunity of seeing the Republican generals, St. Anna and Victoria; they were on horseback, in splendid military costume, and well mounted, but the troops they were reviewing did not

make a very military appearance, being principally recruits, and most of them Indians, or of Indian extraction. At the hour of evening prayer, for the Angelus Domini, the bell rang, and instantly every person was uncovered, and seemed to join in the supplication. We returned to our hotel, if such it deserved to be called, where we could not even be accomodated with beds. With some difficulty I procured a kind of bedstead, on the sacking of which a sheet was spread, and over that a small piece of baize: this constituted the whole furniture of the room, which had no window, but only an opening that communicated with a billiard room, whose noisy visitors were alone, sufficient to prevent repose. On preparing to lie down, I discovered that the solitary sheet was absolutely wet; yet upon making my complaint to the landlord, he replied, that he knew

it, but that he had no other. I told him that wrapping myself in my great coat, and sitting in a chair all night, would be preferable to such a bed; to which he rejoined with the utmost *sang froid*, that he thought it would, and left me to pass a sleepless night, tormented with noise, heat, and mosquitos.

A ramble at day-break in the market-place, made some amends for my miserable lodging. It was filled with Indians, and people from the country, whose diversity of costume, and variety of character, formed an interesting spectacle. The vegetables, however, were few and not fine; and the fruits much inferior to those of Jamaica. The meat-market was a most disgusting sight, the flesh being cut into stripes like ribbons, and sold by measure. It is exposed to the air, and dried without salt; so that one of my companions, a German gentleman, mistook

it for the entrails of the animal placed round the bone. The show of fish, however, made some amends, for it was such for variety and beauty, as I had never before witnessed, nor even conceived. I was aware that the finny race presented more resplendent hues and varieties of forms, when fresh from the water, than birds and insects, but now I became more convinced of this truth. Hundreds of various species glowing in all the colours of the prism; surpassing the lustre of precious gems and all the most brilliant tints of the humming birds, covered the stones of the market-place of Vera Cruz. How greatly did I regret that my time was so short, as only to permit me to prepare a few of the more extraordinary. Of the whole number the mullet (*Mugil Cephalus of Lin.*) was the only one I recollected, as belonging to Europe; most of the rest were new to me.

The Indians had, likewise, several kinds of tortoises, armadillos, and a considerable variety of water fowl, amongst which I observed the shoveller duck (*Anas Clypeata* Lin.—*Souchet commun* of Cuvier) and the common teal:—there were also a few deer. I returned to the inn to breakfast, after the only pleasant morning spent in Vera Cruz. In the forenoon we rambled into the principal church which is large but of indifferent architecture; its side altars abounding in bad carving and gilding, and decorated in the most paltry style, with inferior paintings and painted statues; the large silver candlesticks and tripods so dirty as to have more the appearance of lead than of the precious metal of which they are composed.

Many of the houses of Vera Cruz are large, some three stories high, built in the old Spanish or Moorish style, and generally enclosing a square court, with covered

galleries. They have flat roofs, glass windows, and are well adapted to the climate; most of them have balconies of wood in front, the interior arrangement is the same as in Old Spain. The whole town, as well as the castle, is built of coral, (the *Madrepora meandrities*) and the lime that forms the cement is of the same material, and used for the roofs and foot pavement; it is so hard that, in some places it receives, from friction, a polish like marble. There is one tolerably good square, of which the government-house forms one side, and the principal church the other. The foot-paths are frequently under piazzas, a great accommodation to passengers, protecting them from the sultry heat of the sun, and the heavy rains, which descend in torrents in the wet season.

Sixteen *Cupolas* or *Domes* are counted from the sea, but only six churches are now

in use. Indeed, nearly all the churches, monasteries, and nunneries here, have been abandoned, and are fast falling into decay, since the place has been lost to the Spaniards. Nothing is more repulsive to strangers, accustomed to the bustle of European cities, than the gloomy death-like appearance of the place. Of any other city it is considered a disgrace to say that grass grows in the streets; but here it would be a compliment, for no vegetation\* is to be observed, even for miles around; and fish is the only article of provision not brought from a distance. The only water fit to drink is what falls from the clouds, and is preserved in tanks; that from the castle and the convent of Franciscans being the best. Though the markets are tolerably well supplied by the Indians, living at the hotels is expensive

\* On my arrival it was the dry season, but on my return I found some little verdure.

and very uncomfortable. Provisions are dear, with the exception of fish, which as already stated, was in abundance and good. Some beautiful and curious Mangrove oysters were the largest and finest flavoured I ever met with. Milk is scarcely to be had, as not a cow is kept within miles, and what is, perhaps, peculiar to Vera Cruz, there is not a garden even near it. The absence of vegetation attests at once the poverty of the soil, and the insalubrity of the climate. I know not whether prejudice may not have influenced my decision, but to me Vera Cruz appears the most disagreeable place on earth; and its character of being the most unhealthy spot in the world, naturally makes the stranger shudder every hour he remains within its walls, surrounded by arid sands, extensive swamps, and savannahs, the exhalations from which are removed only by strong

winds. Its rainy season, which is also the hottest, proves fatal to a great proportion not only of strangers, but of the Mexicans themselves; for not to mention the many other afflictions to which frail nature is heir, that scourge of man, the black vomit, would alone, it might be thought, defend the city from the intrusion of visitors, particularly such as myself, whom motives of curiosity only had carried to explore the celebrated capital of the empire, and the wonders of this, to Europeans, almost unknown country;—the source of such immense mineralogical riches, and the scene, rendered interesting by our recollection, of the marvellous feats of Cortez, and the melancholy fate of Montezuma.

Society here, as may be anticipated, is extremely confined, and morality at a very low ebb. Few European merchants, whom the hopes of gain have allured to reside here,

are married. Of the females I can say nothing, for during my stay I never spoke with any.

I had several letters to the first houses, both English and Spanish; but as I brought no cargo nor consignments, and had no speculation to offer, those to whom I had presented them, after a few questions, generally left me with marks of surprise, that a man in his senses could venture so far from home to such a place, with such motives; and this occurred so constantly, that at last they almost persuaded me to be of the same opinion.

Vera Cruz contains about 7000 inhabitants, as I was informed by every one of whom I made the inquiry; and they were persons most likely to possess correct intelligence. Humboldt, who was there in 1802, states the habitual population at

16,000; and the city appears to me as large as many places that contain 20,000 people.

One class of the occupants will excite some surprise in those unacquainted with tropical regions, I mean the carrion vultures; they are as tame in the streets as domestic fowls, and like the dogs from the mountains at Lisbon, act as the scavengers of the place, very speedily clearing away whatever filth may be left. Their senses of sight and smell is very acute: whilst I was preserving some fishes in an apartment at the top of the Posada, the surrounding roofs were crowded by anxious expectants; and when the offal was thrown out, it was, with much contention, greedily consumed. They are on good *terms* with the dogs, and the two animals may be frequently seen devouring the same carcase. They pass the night

on the roofs of the churches, where I have sometimes observed several hundreds, but never saw them breeding.

When I left England it was understood that New Spain had a permanent government under the constitutional emperor Iturbide. I had provided myself with letters to his ministers; and took out as presents such articles of British manufacture as I considered would be most acceptable, and at the same time convey some idea of the wealth and greatness of our country; but on my arrival at Vera Cruz, affairs were so different from what I had anticipated that I was yet doubtful whether strangers could in safety visit the capital, as the armies of the contending parties, the Imperialists and Republicans, lay between Vera Cruz and Mexico. With a view of acquiring information on this subject, I solicited and obtained an interview with the

Republican General St. Anna, although at the time confined to his room by indisposition. I stated to him my motives for visiting the country. He no sooner understood that my journey was solely to acquire scientific information, than he liberally refused even to examine my letters or papers, and immediately gave me an assurance of his protection and passports for Xalapa, where he advised me to remain till circumstances justified my proceeding, observing at the same time that he had no doubt but that either party, on being assured of the objects of my travels, would do all in their power to forward them; as, contrary to the policy of Old Spain, they now wished Europe, and particularly England, to become better acquainted with Mexico. On leaving the town-house I was accosted by Colonel Barbabossa, a distinguished officer in the cause of liberty; he had learnt the nature

of my business, and offered me his protection as far as Puebla, to which city he was proceeding next morning with an escort. After expressing my thanks for his kindness, I acquainted him that our setting out so early would be impracticable, as my companion had not yet completed his preparations. He jocosely observed, "I suppose when you return you will publish an account of us—if so, do not forget the offer I make you."